

Reconstructing the US national consensus



By Charles McKelvey

Recently, on the Cuban evening news program La Mesa Redonda, Jorge Hernández, a researcher of the Center for US and Hemispheric Studies of the University of Havana, reflecting on the profound political conflicts within the United States, observed that nationalism is the only way to reconstruct the national consensus of the USA. This is indeed true. However, we should be clear on one point. Nationalism need not be conservative, reactionary, ethnocentric, xenophobic, or racist. Nationalism can be progressive, with an inclusive, social agenda for the benefit of the majority, and with a commitment to respect for the sovereignty of other nations.

The anti-imperialist movements of Latin America and the Third World revolutions of national liberation have been shaped by nationalism, not a reactionary nationalism, but nationalism with a revolutionary stamp. The great revolutionaries of the Third World, like Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Hugo Chávez, were all great patriots; motivated by love for the nation and faith in its future, they staunchly defended the nationalist cause. The popular revolutions of the Third World came to power in the name of the nation, taking power from the hands of politicians who had betrayed the nation.

The Leftist movements in the materially advanced nations of the North have not been careful observers of the Third World revolutions. Some make idealist, ultra-Left criticisms of the Third World revolutions; others

embrace and support the Third World revolutions, celebrating the revolutionary heroes of the Third World, but often with a superficial understanding.

For the most part, leftists have not undertaken studies of the speeches and writings of the great revolutionaries of the Third World. I repeat: leftists of the North have not, for the most part, studied the speeches and writings of the great revolutionaries of the Third World. They therefore have not seen that patriotic discourses were a factor in the capacity of Third World leaders to attain the support of the people for a revolutionary national project. They have overlooked a lesson for the social movement leaders of the North. Namely, if the people are to be brought on board in a movement for social justice, it is not enough to condemn the social sins of racism, inequality, discrimination, and imperialism, which to some extent is an accusation against the people themselves; nor to call for the powers-that-be to implement particular reforms, which will be done only partially; social movement leaders also must envision a better future for the nation, calling the people to the taking of political power, so that they can build of a more just nation on the foundation of the popular social movements of the nation's history.

When the U.S. Left does not find the time to study the speeches and writings of Third World leaders, it implies a belief that Third World leaders have nothing to teach, in spite of their achievements in bringing popular revolutions to power, something that the U.S. Left has never come close to accomplishing.

Let us set aside this subtle ethnocentrism. On the basis of reflection on the achievements of Third World revolutions for the past two centuries, we of the United States, for example, might be able to formulate a leftist reconstruction of the national narrative of the United States on a progressive foundation.

A progressive national narrative that not only condemns the social sins of the past and present, but also formulates a comprehensive vision for the future of the nation; a narrative that explains the future, on the basis of a new explanation of how the nation ought to look at its past. Without a leftist national narrative, the U.S. Left condemns itself to a permanent position of limited influence, always speaking truth to power, but never imagining leading the people to the taking of power in their name.

The U.S. Left must recognize that it has failed to persuade many of the people, making possible the rise of Trump and other politicians of the Right, who invoke a narrow and outdated form of nationalism, which the Left should have been capable of discrediting and delegitimizing fifty years ago.

The historic error of the U.S. Left has been its devaluation in practice of the revolutions of the Third World, from which, among other lessons, one can learn of the force of patriotic sentiments in the hearts of the peoples, and the need of the peoples for a nationalist cause and a national project.

Today the Left must look toward the historic and contemporary Third World revolutions, seeking insight into the possibilities for a progressive form of nationalism, necessary for the construction of a progressive national consensus in the USA, overcoming the current division and confusion.

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